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AUTHOR Mitchell, Wallace, Ed.
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ABSTRACT

This policy brief examines states' experiences and data reporting implementation of the transition planning mandate of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. It reports on a study which investigated whether implementation of transition planning was associated with decreased dropout rates for youth with disabilities and whether the format for reporting on how special education students exit the system should be revised. Transition related data from the Department of Education were analyzed and interviews were conducted with state-level special education personnel in three states with relatively high school completion rates for their students with disabilities. Data analysis indicated that a previously increasing dropout rate began to decline with mandated transition planning for youth ages 16 and above, but not for youth 14-15 years old, which continued to climb. These results support the value of transition services beginning at age 14. The experiences of the three states support the value of transition planning and services as a component of each student's individualized program. The report also includes graphs showing trend data in the dropout rate for youth with disabilities ages 14 to 21 and ages 14 to 16. (Contains 13 references.) (CR)

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Leaving School

A Project ALIGN Issue Brief March, 1997

Implementing Transition Planning: What Data and State Experiences Can Tell Policy Makers and Educators

Has implementation of the transition planning mandate been associated with any improvement in dropout rates for youth with disabilities?

Implementing the Transition Planning Mandate

In recent years, educators have focused upon systematic planning that will prepare youth with disabilities to assume successful, productive, and satisfying adult lives. A wealth of information now exists that suggests that:

- students with special needs require self-advocacy training, extensive employability skills training, systematic referral to adult agencies, family involvement, and immediate and on-going job support in order to obtain and maintain employment over time (Patton, 1996, 360).

In 1990, The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act(P.L. 101-476 , IDEA) mandated the provision of systematic *transition planning* to begin for each student with disabilities *no later than age sixteen*. Transition services are defined as:

- a coordinated set of activities for a student, designed within an outcome-oriented process, which promotes movement from school to post-school activities, including post-secondary education, vocational training, integrated employment (including supported employment), continuing and adult education, adult services, independent living, or community (34 CFR 300.18).

Although individualized transition planning must occur by the time the student reaches the age of sixteen, IDEA *provided* that planning may begin earlier, *at age fourteen*, when appropriate. Some of the proposals forwarded during the current process of reauthorization of IDEA have recommended transition planning begin at age fourteen rather than sixteen.

> **IDEA mandated systematic transition planning to begin for each student with disabilities *no later than age sixteen*.**

Adolescence is a period of tremendous transition. Societal expectations and demands increase significantly as youth prepare for and assume adult life roles. School completion represents a critical outcome indicator of public education, and approximately 74% of all youth complete high school (National Center for Educational Statistics, 1993). For youth with disabilities the demands of adolescence are especially challenging. Only slightly more than half (57%) of students with disabilities graduate and school completion rates for students with particular disabilities are especially low. For example, school completion rates for student with emotional/behavioral disabilities were 35% for the 1991-92 school year (U.S. Department of Education, 1994). Youth with disabilities are unemployed at a higher rate than their nondisabled peers, they tend to drop out of school before graduation, they are involved with the criminal system to a higher degree, and they tend to be living in a dependent situation for a longer period of time (Patton, 1996).

Completing school, however, is not enough to assure a successful outcome for youth with disabilities. A growing body of research indicates relatively poor attainments with respect to employment, assimilation

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into the community, and living arrangements (Halpern, 1995; Wehman, 1990). According to the National Longitudinal Transition Study, approximately 58% of youth with disabilities were competitively employed 3 to 5 years after leaving school, which compares to 69% achieved by the general population. The median hourly wage obtained for youth with disabilities, in general, was $5.72, which corresponds to an annual salary of less than $12,000 per year (Wagner, D'Amico, Marder, Newman, & Blackorby, 1992).

The mandate to provide comprehensive transition planning and services to all youth with disabilities was intended to support school completion and better outcomes. Early experiences, however, have shown that the transition process is very complex and that successful implementation is a challenge (Furney, Hasazi & DeStefano, 1997). At the local level, students, teachers, and parents are often confused or uncertain about options and resources (Szymanski, 1994). At the policy level, many believe implementation of the transition mandate will require major, long term changes and increases in school, community and adult agency capacity (DeStefano & Wermuth, 1992; Furney et al., 1997).

The purpose of this Project ALIGN *Issue Brief* is to examine two questions regarding states' experiences and data regarding implementation of the transition planning mandate:

1. Has implementation of the transition planning mandate been associated with any improvement in dropout rates for youth with disabilities?

2. Is there support for a change in the transition planning mandate from age sixteen to age fourteen?

Examining State Dropout Data

To provide policy makers and educators with information about the value of transition services and about when such services should begin, analyses of data for the nation's youth with disabilities and interviews with three states were conducted. Transition-related data for these analyses were drawn from the U.S. Department of Education's Annual Reports to Congress, 1988 through 1996. From each Annual Report we extracted the number of special education students (age 16 to 21) that dropped out, the number of special education students (age 14 or 15) that dropped out, and the estimated number of children in the resident population. For each year, a national dropout rate was calculated for each of the age groups according to the following formula:

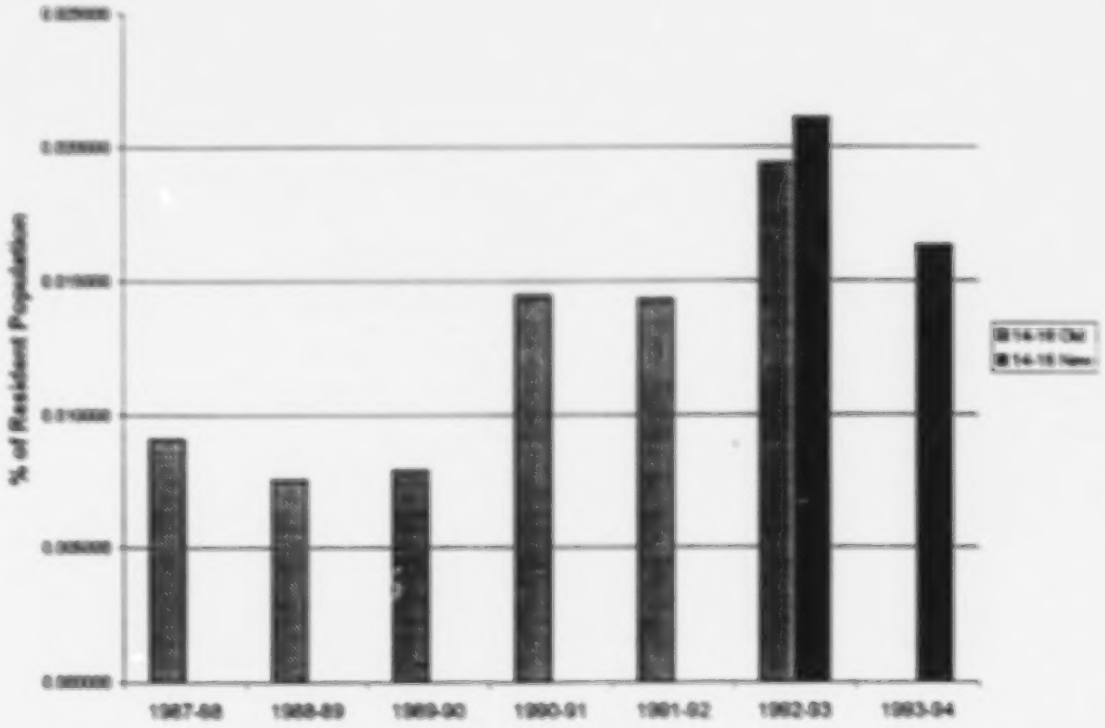
$$\frac{\text{Number of Sp Ed. students who dropped out}}{\text{Number of children in resident population}} \times 100 = \text{Dropout rate as a \% of Resident Population}$$

In this way, the dropout rate is adjusted for changing population figures and can be compared across years with integrity. Dropout data for fourteen and fifteen years olds was not collected in 1985-86 or 1986-87, so only seven years of data are included for this age group.

For most of the time period under consideration, the dropout numbers represented "an estimate of those who were actually known to have dropped out and [did] not include youth who simply stopped coming to school or whose status was unknown." (US Dept. of Education, 1988, p. 46) In the 1992-93 school year, OSEP allowed states to choose between the existing format for reporting on how special education students exited the system and a revised format. The revised format included several new categories ("returned to regular education," "died," and "moved") and a new definition of "dropped out." In the new system, "dropped out" is defined as "the total who were enrolled at some point in the reporting year, were not enrolled at the end of the reporting year, and did not exit through any of the other bases described. This category includes dropouts, runaways, GED recipients, expulsions, status unknown, and other exiters." (US Dept. of Education, 1995, p. A-157) Approximately one-half of the states continued to use the old format for 1992-93 and one-half moved to the new format. Because of the new definition, dropout rates prior to 1992-93 are not comparable to rates after 1992-93. Further, for the year 1992-93, *two* national dropout rates are reported, an "old format" rate and a "new format" rate, each based on approximately one half of the states.

Figure 1 presents the data on the national dropout rates for 16 to 21 year old students from school year 1985-86 to school year 1993-94. Using the old definition of

Figure 2
National Dropout Rate: Youth with Disabilities Ages 14-16



Transition Experiences of Three States

In addition to the above analyses, in order to provide a more complete picture of state experiences with implementation of the transition services mandate, interviews were conducted with states who have been relatively more successful in achieving a higher school completion rate for youth with disabilities. Three states were selected for interviews on the basis of the most recent four year period for which data were available (school years 1989-90 through 1992-93). States chosen were those that demonstrated relatively high and stable percentages of students with disabilities who exited by means of a diploma or certificate. Table 1 summarizes background characteristics of the three states.

State-level special education personnel were interviewed in each state regarding their experience with transition planning and initiatives related to increasing the graduation rate of youth with disabilities. Each interview addressed how the state currently implements transition planning and whether these services should begin at age fourteen. Findings related to initiatives to increase the graduation rate are reported in a separate Project ALIGN *Issue Brief*: "Understanding and Increasing the Graduation Rate of Youth with Disabilities." With respect to implementation of transition planning and services, state

> The rate of dropouts in the 14-16 year range showed an increasing trend throughout the years of the old definition.

"dropout," dropout rates showed a general increasing trend from 85-86 through 89-90. Dropouts declined nationally in 90-91, the year the mandate to provide transition services was passed, and remained low for the next two years. In 92-93, the half of the states that used the new definition showed a substantial increase in rate, probably due at least in part to the fact that the new definition is broader. The 93-94 rate, including all 50 states and DC, was slightly higher but without additional years' data it is impossible to determine whether this represents an adjustment based on including all of the states for the first time, the beginning of another increasing trend, or simply the normal fluctuation of a stable rate.

> Dropouts declined nationally in 90-91, the year the mandate to provide transition services was passed, and remained low for the next two years.

Figure 1
National Dropout Rate: Youth with Disabilities Ages 16-21

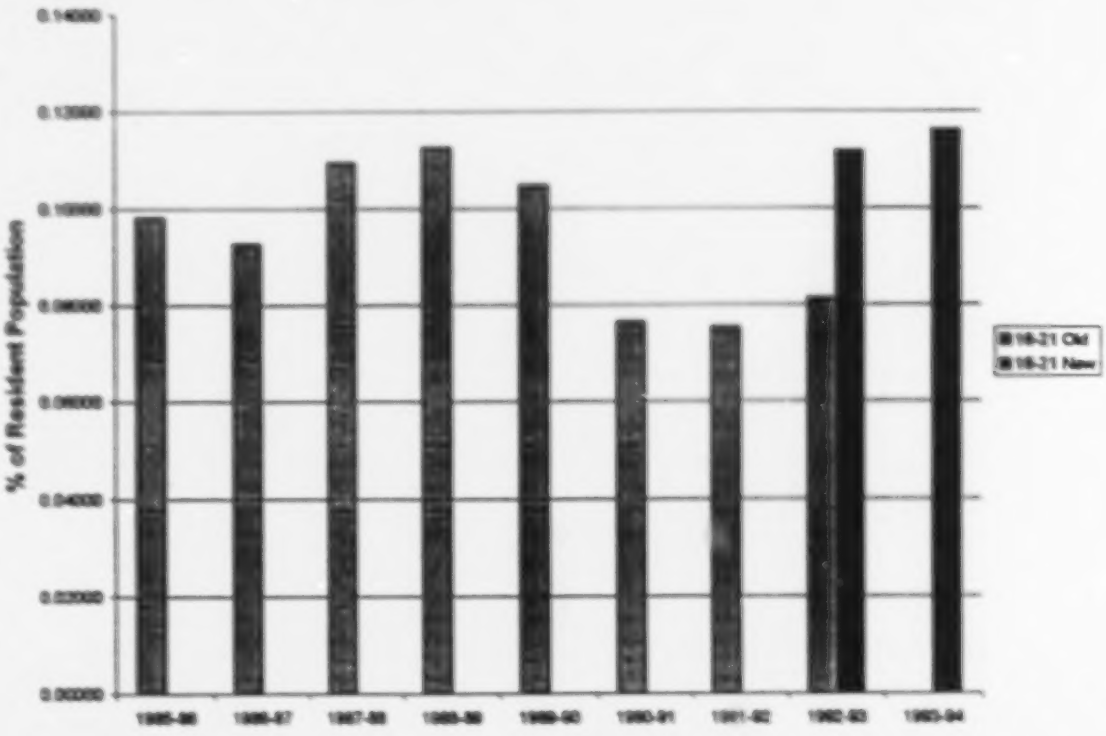


Figure 2 presents national data for 14-16 year old dropouts. The figure begins with school year 1987-88 because data on 14-16 year old dropouts was not collected in earlier years. The rate of dropouts in the 14-16 year range showed an increasing trend throughout the years of the old definition. When the definition was changed, the states using the new definition showed a slightly higher rate; however, when all 50 states and DC began using the new definition in 93-94, the rate dropped off somewhat. Once again, without additional data points, it is impossible to determine whether this represents the beginning of a decreasing trend, or is related to the fact that all fifty states are included for the first time.

Table 1
State Characteristics

Feature	State 1	State 2	State 3
Population Density	Middle	Middle	Low
Location	Mid-Atlantic	North-East	West
Percent White Resident Population	Middle	High	High
Number of School Districts	141	283	40
Percent of Adults Who Dropped Out	24.9%	21.2%	14.9%

Data Sources: NCES Common Core of Data, 1992.

experiences and approaches varied in many respects, but several common themes emerged:

1. State regulations are consistent with federal requirements regarding provision of transition planning and services
2. Each state was a recipient of a statewide transition systems change grant--supported by the U.S. Office of Special Education Programs
3. Planning must begin by age sixteen, although planning is encouraged at grade nine or age fourteen for many students in two states. In the third state, transition planning begins at age fourteen for approximately one-fifth of all youth with disabilities.
4. Two states support age fourteen as the best time to begin transition planning. The third state finds the current system to be working well, i.e., keep the mandate at age sixteen with flexibility to begin at fourteen if needed.
5. Two states rely on a "transition coordinator" role to help fulfill the transition planning requirements.
6. Specialized training and assistance has been provided to support successful implementation of the mandate. These are supported by federal and state monies, are sometimes linked with other state agencies (e.g., Vocational Rehabilitation) and state initiatives (e.g., activities under the School to Work Opportunities Act), and are designed to improve capacity and support long term change.
7. All states reported implementation of transition services to be vital and effective in assisting youth with disabilities to complete school and obtain employment after leaving school. Other reported benefits included increased participation in postsecondary education opportunities and greater likelihood of receiving needed services from adult agencies.
8. States identified several additional issues yet to be addressed, including needs for:
   - Continued training and support through existing or other mechanisms.
   - Expanded capacity of adult service agencies to meet identified needs of young adults with disabilities.
   - Expanded collaboration among the many agencies and employers at the community and state level.
   - Better preparation of teachers to assume transition planning and service responsibilities.
   - Increased linkages with related state and national initiatives, e.g., the School to Work Opportunities Act

These findings are similar to those obtained in a recent policy study involving a two year in-depth study of three states identified as exemplary in their achievement related to designing and implementing transition policies and services (Furney, Hasazi & DeStefano (1997). These researchers reported that several themes characterized successful transition policies, practices, and services, including linking transition planning and services to other restructuring efforts, building capacity for long lasting change, and building

collaborative structures to promote systemic change.

Findings Support the Value of Transition Services Beginning at Age Fourteen

The federal mandate in 1990 to implement comprehensive transition planning and services is a far reaching and ambitious goal. The analysis of data on the dropout rate of youth with disabilities indicates that a change in the national dropout trend line for 16-21 year olds occurs at a point corresponding to the passage of the mandate in 1990; at that point, a previously increasing rate begins to decline. However, no corresponding decline is apparent for youth 14-15 years old; indeed, the dropout rate for these youth has continued to climb until the most recent year for which data are available. The apparent decline in this most recent year may be related to the changed definition and a clear trend under the new definition will not be available for several years.

The experiences of three states who have had relatively good school completion rates for youth with disabilities supports the belief that transition planning and services are a valuable component of the individualized program each child with a disability is to receive. However, state experiences also underscore the importance of strong leadership and continued support and assistance for developing capacity among all service providers and linking transition services to other restructuring and reform efforts.

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Project ALIGN:

"Improving Data Based Decision Making To Align the Intent and Implementation of IDEA With the Goals of National Education Reform"

For more information about this *Issue Brief* or other Project ALIGN products, please contact:

Donald Oswald, Ph.D.
Commonwealth Institute for Child and Family Studies
Medical College of Virginia
P.O. Box 980489
Richmond, Virginia 23298
or
Martha Coutinho, Ph.D.
East Tennessee State University
HDAL, P.O. Box 70548
Johnson City, TN 37614

Issue Brief Editor:
Melissa Mitchell, East Tennessee State University.